

**Basic Outline for an
INTERREG IIIC
Regional Framework Operation
(RFO)**

**„Enhancing
exchange of experience
and
practical transfer of know-
how
between cross-border regions
in Europe”**

by the
Association of European Border Regions

March 2002

1. Introduction

The Association of European Border Regions (AEBR) considers „inter-regional co-operation“ among regions, local authorities and other regional/local actors an important tool that can further enhance co-operation capacities of cross-border regions throughout Europe.

Currently, inter-regional co-operation is supported by the **C-Strand of the Community Initiative INTERREG III (INTERREG IIIC)**. According to the INTERREG IIIC-Communication of the Commission,¹ inter-regional co-operation shall improve the effectiveness of policies and instruments for regional development and cohesion and will follow a new programme-based approach. The INTERREG IIIC-Guidelines propose 3 different types of operations that shall encourage co-operation among regions and cities in Europe: The “Regional Framework Operation” (a type of mini-programme), “individual projects” and „Networks“.

The Guidelines define a large number of thematical topics for which regions and local authorities can establish one of these 3 basic types of operation. Among the topics listed for inter-regional co-operation under INTERREG IIIC, there is also a specific theme called “Inter-regional co-operation linking public authorities or equivalent bodies involved in other INTERREG –programmes“. According to the Communication, *„the aim of this topic is to enable exchanges of experience and networking among border-areas and among transnational areas (...)*.

Two types of documents will shape the practical implementation of inter-regional co-operation activities under INTERREG IIIC:

- At date, **4 „Operational Programmes“** are elaborated for larger planning zones (West Zone, East Zone, North Zone, South Zone) that contain basic guidelines on the themes and type of actions for inter-regional co-operation.
- In addition, a **„Programme Complement“** is elaborated for each **Operational Programme** that contains the technical prescriptions for the practical implementation, especially at project-level (indicators for project selection and implementation etc.).

A number of draft versions of the above mentioned documents do already exist and allow a first orientation on the practical implementation. Both type of documents are expected to be adopted in the coming weeks and months by the relevant authorities / organisms responsible for approval (Operational Programme → Commission; Programme Complement → Steering Committee).

Based upon these considerations, **AEBR suggests creating a European-wide network of co-operating border regions that takes the form of a “Regional Framework Operation” (RFO)**.

In order to support the development of an RFO among border regions in Europe, **this document will present the basic outline for a future RFO:**

- Preliminary Steps necessary for setting up the „RFO-Partnership“ and for defining basic elements of the RFO-co-operation strategy.
- A „blueprint“ of RFO-co-operation structures and related activities and an outline of the RFO-management structure.

¹ Commission Communication C(2001)1188 final: “Inter-regional co-operation”: Strand C of the Interreg III Community Initiative. OJ 2001/ C141/02

- On overview table on expected outcomes/deliverables that the RFO will “hand over” to the main target groups / end-beneficiaries.
- A flow chart that illustrates how the co-operation and management/implementation structures are linked together and that gives an indicative threshold for budgetary allocations of the RFO.

2. Basic features of an INTERREG IIC Regional Framework Operation (RFO)

According to the INTERREG IIC Guidelines, basic features of a “Regional Framework Operation” can be described as follows.

The RFO aims at stimulating a more strategic approach to co-operation between regions. An RFO shall allow a group of regional authorities or equivalent regional bodies (1st level regions mainly),

- to address a limited number of issues (themes) ensuring that interregional co-operation is better integrated into the economic, social and territorial development of the partner areas,
- to exchange experience on methodology and project based activities, with the goal to produce a clear strategic approach to interregional co-operation
- to implement a limited number of smaller projects between other actors within the RFO.

The basic **organisational aspects/structural features of a RFO** can be described as follows:

- A RFO is **prepared by a group of regions or equivalent regional bodies from a minimum of three different countries.** Each region is **supported by a regional partnership** consisting of the authorities and organisations with a role to play in the RFO.
- **The RFO takes the form of a “mini-operational programme”,²** which is submitted by the lead partner of the group of regions to the INTERREG IIC-programme managing authority of the larger programming-area in which he is located. RFOs cover all 5 co-operation topics outlined in the INTERREG IIC Guidelines and may be granted an ERDF-contribution between EURO 500,000 and 5 million.
- **The RFO covers a limited range of themes relevant to the regions participating, which are defined in an inter-regional co-operation strategy** (objectives, expected results, and limited number of issues for co-operation).
- **The RFO-strategy is implemented via a limited number of “smaller projects”,** for which co-operation is particularly justified. The RFO-internal projects are implemented by territorial authorities and equivalent bodies or private partners that are located in the areas of the regions participating in the RFO (if a public authority provides necessary guarantees to ensure the proper management of public funds).
- **The “lead partner of the RFO” is responsible for** collating payment requests from other partners and submitting a single payment request to the other payment authority of the programme. Payments can be made from the paying authority directly to the partners of the RFO. They will then be responsible for paying the project partners of their own area and take responsibility for financial management in their region.

² Information to be provided for a RFO: (1) Content of the proposed operation: objectives and results, interregional strategy, types of projects to be funded, division of funding etc. (2) Management and implementation of the Operation: lead partner, steering committee, implementation system, financial system, control system, practical arrangements for exchange of information and co-operation, monitoring and evaluation etc. (3) Financing plan, (4) Partnership and (5) Information and promotion.

3. Preliminary Steps: „Partnership-Building“ and “Strategy Definition”

Before going into details of the RFO's co-operation structures and of a definition of the RFO's activities, a number of preparatory steps should be accomplished. **The two most important preliminary steps** are the following:

- Identifying and setting up a broad and solid RFO-partnership.
- Defining a coherent RFO-strategy (overall goals) with a limited number of co-operation themes (thematic priorities and measures).

These issues should be tackled at the level of the AEBR, as the Association has a large range of member regions and has recently carried out a survey on fields of interest for future activities among its members. Based on the outcome of this discussion, a more concrete RFO-proposal can then be prepared by the relevant partnership.

Identifying and setting up a broad RFO-Partnership

According to the prescriptions of the INTERREG IIIC-Communication regarding „RFOs“, such a type of operation (...) *is prepared by a group of regions or equivalent regional bodies from a minimum of three different countries. Each region is supported by a regional partnership consisting of the authorities and organisations with a role to play in the RFO.*

It is recommended that the envisaged RFO respects the minimum requirements for partnership, but possibly develops a much wider approach for co-operation especially with regard to an inclusion of third country/accession country partners.

Therefore, the future RFO-membership should consist of the following 2 types of partners:

- **Main Partners:** These are “regions” or “equivalent regional bodies” (Lead Partner responsible for managing the network and other “Main Partners) that financially contribute to the RFO and who may also be involved in implementing specific RFO-sub-projects (see: Chapter 4 below). Of particular relevance for this particular RFO is that membership is based on a “cross-border approach”, i.e. main partners should possibly join in the RFO with their respective partner region located on the other side of the common border.
- **Associated Partners:** These are actors coming from the border areas of the main partner regions and would act as the “regional partnership” supporting each main partner region (e.g. sub-regional authorities and local authorities, cross-border structures, other public or semi-public actors, chambers of commerce and industry, NGOs, etc.). These “associated partners” can be considered as „target groups“ or „main beneficiaries“ of RFO-activities and will in particular be involved in implementing specific RFO-projects (see: Chapter 4 below).

Identifying the “Goal”, “Thematic Priorities” and “Measures” for Joint Co-operation

The INTERREG IIIC-Communication contains some general information as regards the general topic “Inter-regional co-operation linking public authorities or equivalent bodies involved in other INTERREG-programmes“: *The aim of this topic is to enable exchanges of experience and networking among border-areas (...). Actions can cover co-operation on cross-border (...) activities, where a wider degree of co-operation would be beneficial. Actions should also focus on the implementation dimension of Interreg Programmes (for*

example networking among several secretariats to examine procedures and operational structures).

Other prescriptions of the Guidelines lay down that a RFO normally takes the form of a “mini-operational programme”,³ which covers a limited range of themes relevant to the regions participating that are defined in an inter-regional co-operation strategy (objectives, expected results, limited number of issues for co-operation).

Therefore, the envisaged RFO should **identify an overall strategic objective (goal) and focus on a limited number of themes (priorities/measures) that will guide co-operation among its members.**

The “overall goal” of the RFO should be to **enhance exchange of experience and practical transfer of know-how among border regions, cross-border structures and other actors involved in cross-border co-operation, especially with regard to the „generation“ of truly cross-border co-operation projects that are based on best practice existing throughout Europe** (→ see the overall objectives of INTERREG IIIC and the specific prescriptions on the „implementation dimension of INTERREG Programmes“);

For implementing this “overall goal”, **the RFO will stimulate targeted co-operation among border regions and other actors in border areas within the context of a limited number of thematical priorities that are of particular relevance for cross-border co-operation throughout Europe.** In order to further define the focus of each priority, **it is suggested to identify also a number of directly related sub-themes (measures).**

Proposal for a “RFO-Strategy Outline”	
Thematic Priorities	Related Sub-themes (Measures)
Enhancing Endogenous Economic Development in Cross Border Areas	<input type="checkbox"/> SMEs and business development <input type="checkbox"/> Innovation, Research and Development <input type="checkbox"/> Transport and Infrastructure <input type="checkbox"/> Tourism <input type="checkbox"/> Overcoming legal / administrative problems for cross-border economic activity
Promoting Balanced and Co-ordinated Development Planning in Cross Border Areas as well as Co-operation among border regions with similar geographical features	<input type="checkbox"/> Spatial Planning <input type="checkbox"/> Regional Development and Rural Development Planning <input type="checkbox"/> Transport and Infrastructure Planning <input type="checkbox"/> Planning and Developing Public Services (Health and Social Services) <input type="checkbox"/> Co-operation among border regions in mountainous areas, coastal areas etc.
Enhancing lasting cross-border structures and facilitating mutual knowledge and mobility in Cross Border Regions	<input type="checkbox"/> Cross-border co-operation structures <input type="checkbox"/> Culture and Media <input type="checkbox"/> Small scale People-to-People Activities <input type="checkbox"/> Cross-border Labour Market <input type="checkbox"/> Training and Education
Promoting Sustainable Development in Cross Border Regions	<input type="checkbox"/> Cross-border Environmental Policy <input type="checkbox"/> Nature Conservation and Protection <input type="checkbox"/> Sustainability in Agriculture <input type="checkbox"/> Promoting Sustainable Development at the levels of individual enterprises and citizens

³ Information to be provided for a RFO: (1) Content of the proposed operation: objectives and results, interregional strategy, types of projects to be funded, division of funding etc. (2) Management and implementation of the Operation: lead partner, steering committee, implementation system, financial system, control system, practical arrangements for exchange of information and co-operation, monitoring and evaluation etc. (3) Financing plan, (4) Partnership and (5) Information and promotion.

4. A „Blueprint“ of the RFO-Co-operation and Management Structures

In order to achieve the “overall goal” of the RFO and the objectives defined for each thematic priority, **specific co-operation structures will have to be established for the RFO (see more in detail below, section 4.1.)**. These structures are the “locus” where joint activities among the RFO-members (main partners and associated partners) are carried out. They are the following:

- ❑ **A „Thematic Forum“ for each Priority of the RFO-Strategy.**
- ❑ **A limited number of „Mini-Networks“, established between actors from border areas.**

In addition, a RFO requires the setting up of **specific structures that are concerned with management, practical implementation and facilitation of networking (see more in detail below, section 4.2.)**. The most important elements are:

- ❑ **A “lead partner“, who is the overall responsible partner for the RFO.**
- ❑ **An RFO-Steering Committee, which is the main decision making body of the RFO.**
- ❑ **A Project selection mechanisms.**
- ❑ **A system for implementation, financial management and control.**
- ❑ **A „RFO-Helpdesk“, which facilitates co-operation at all levels.**

4.1. Main RFO-co-operation structures and their activities

Two basic co-operation structures are established in the framework of the RFO that shall allow for

- ❑ a focussed exchange of experience on major thematic fields that are of particular relevance to border regions, cross-border structures and other actors involved in cross-border co-operation (**joint co-operation at priority level: “Thematic Forums”**),
- ❑ a practical implementation of a transfer of know-how, especially regarding the „generation“ of truly cross-border co-operation projects that are based on best practice existing throughout Europe (**joint co-operation at measure level: “Mini-Networks”**).

All “main partners” can participate - together with “associated partners” coming from their border area - in the RFO’s activities at the level of each „Thematic Forum“ and of the different „Mini-Networks“.

„Thematic Forums“

A Thematic Forum is set up for each Priority of the RFO (in total 4 Thematic Forums). They are “vehicles” for joint reflection, exchange of experience, identification and spread of best practice with regard to each thematical focus of the RFO-strategy. They are composed of all interested “main partners” (regions from different EU-countries and from Third Countries, AEHR) and of all interested “associated partners (i.e. local authorities and cross-border co-operation structures, other actors from border areas).

Their main aim is to enhance long-term orientated reflection in this particular aspect of the RFO-strategy and to allow for an exchange of experience among various actors located in border regions. An other aim of each „Thematic Forum“ is to continuously deepen knowledge

on best practice at project level throughout Europe and to support the spread of this information to a larger public (above the RFO-membership).

Joint work in the framework of each „Thematic Forum“ is of a steady nature and will be accompanied by regular joint meetings (2 meeting per year). **Co-operation at this level should “produce” at least the following results:**

- ❑ Further assess the general relevance of the specific priority for cross-border co-operation in Europe and improve the specific knowledge/expertise in this field.
- ❑ Evaluate and discuss the outcomes of previous cross-border projects in the specific theme and identify best practice project examples.
- ❑ Promote best practice standards across Europe.

In order to ensure broadest possible participation and dissemination of results, one could foresee that all Thematic Fora would jointly meet during an “Annual Conference” (with substantial contributions from each Thematic Forum).

The „Mini-Networks“

According to the INTERREG IIIC Guidelines, each RFO (and its strategy) is implemented via a limited number of smaller projects. In the case of the present RFO, these **“RFO-internal projects” will be the so-called “Mini-Networks”**.

Mini-Networks are the tool for enhancing joint co-operation at measure level. They must **concentrate on one of the 4 RFO-priorities and select a single sub-theme (maximum two sub-themes together) as the topic for mutual co-operation.** The RFO-strategy should however define the upper limit for the total number of Mini-Networks that can be set up per priority during the overall running period of the RFO (e.g. a maximum of 4 → maximum of 16 Mini-Networks for the entire RFO).

Mini Networks are the **“place” where a sharing and a practical transfer of know-how will be realised** between the core target groups of the RFO (end-beneficiaries). Their **main aims** are

- ❑ to identify “new cross-border focuses / issues” in their specific sub-theme and to establish themselves – over the time - as “theme-specific centres of excellence”,
- ❑ to apply best practice and to transfer know how during a continuous process of transforming initial ideas towards fully-fledged and truly cross-border project proposals.

Mini-Networks are normally elaborated by “RFO-associated partners” that are located in the border areas of the “main partner regions” (territorial authorities at sub-regional level, public or semi-public partners, cross-border structures, private partners if a public authority provides necessary guarantees to ensure the proper management of public funds), **but they may also include one or more “RFO-main partners”** (regional authorities and equivalent bodies). Once elaborated, **each proposal for a “Mini-Network” is submitted by its promoters to the RFO-Steering Committee and will have to undergo a pre-defined selection procedure (see in detail below, section 4.2).**

Joint work in the framework of each „Mini-Networks“ is of a steady and ongoing nature and will be accompanied by regular joint meetings (4 times a year). **Co-operation activities at should “produce” at least the following results:**

- Identify new and innovative cross-border project ideas and provide a permanent input for co-operation at the level of the entire priority (especially with regard to the „Thematic Forum“).
- Elaborate a limited number of new and truly cross-border project proposals that can be implemented practically during a later stage (not in the framework of the RFO, but via project submissions to external funding programmes such as INTERREG IIIA, PHARE CBC or TACIS CBC).

4.2. Main RFO-management structures and their activities / responsibilities

The “RFO-Lead Partner”

According to the technical rules of the INTERREG IIIC-Communication, one main partner (“region” or equivalent body according to INTERREG IIIC definition) will have to act as **Lead Partner**. The “RFO-Lead Partner” is **generally responsible for**

- the overall management of the network
- for collating payment requests from other partners and submitting a single payment request to the other payment authority of the relevant INTERREG IIIC programme.

Besides its general role, the “Lead Partner” will - of course – also participate fully in all networking activities of the RFO.

A Structure for Joint Decision Making

The „**Steering Committee**“ is composed of one representative of each “main partner” and will be the responsible for joint decision making on all issues regarding the RFO.

The Steering Committee will also examine the proposals for “Mini-Networks” and approve them - after a positive outcome of the selection procedure - as RFO-projects.

A Project Selection Mechanism

In order to establish a **procedure that can be used by the Steering Committee for project selection**, the “RFO-main partners” will have to define in advance the following aspects:

- Overall thresholds for project based co-operation within the RFO (maximum number of mini-networks envisaged for the entire RFO, minimum/maximum budget for each mini-network),
- General eligibility criteria for the Steering Committee’s selection procedure, i.e. criteria regarding participation (minimum number of participants) or project management (i.e. joint structures, mechanism for reporting and financial claims etc.),
- Specific selection criteria regarding the contents of each “mini-network” (i.e. basic features of working methods, minimum-degree of expected outcomes).

Operational and Financial Management at the Level of “Mini-Networks”:

Each Mini-Network will be managed by a Lead Partner, who is not identical with the overall „RFO-Lead Partner“ (region, local authority, public or semi-public body, cross-border structure). He is responsible for organising the day-to-day activities of the Mini-Network and prepares adequate inputs for the relevant “Thematic Forum” of its Priority.

The Lead Partner of a Mini-Network also assures that permanent progress reports on networking activities are sent to the “RFO-Lead Partner“ every 6 month. He will be responsible for making financial claims to the “RFO-Lead Partner“ on behalf of the for the Mini-Network Partnership.

The Lead Partner of a Mini-Network also receives payments for the entire Mini-Network partnership from the RFO-Lead Partner. He will then pay directly the other partners of the Mini-Network.

The „RFO-Helpdesk“

In addition to the above mentioned management structures, a “**Helpdesk**” is established for the RFO. The “RFO-Helpdesk” is an important tool that

- ❑ acts as a “facilitator” and a “resource centre” for co-operation within the RFO,
- ❑ assures general dissemination of information/experience among the RFO-partners and among the interested public “outside the RFO-partnership,
- ❑ ensures a coherent link with Strand A-activities of the forthcoming INTERACT-programme.

The most important aims of the „RFO-Helpdesk“ are

- ❑ **to provide targeted support for co-operation at the level of each “Thematic Forum“** (e.g. organisation of “Thematic Forum” meetings and their “Annual Conference” ; publishing of the proceedings of “Thematic Forum” meetings; drafting of specialised studies or best-practice manuals to support work at the level of the individual priorities),
- ❑ **to provide targeted support for co-operation at the level of the “Mini-Networks”,** both during their set-up phase (e.g. partner search, technical assistance for elaborating Mini-Network proposals) and during their actual implementation phase after final adoption (e.g. technical assistance for setting up;
- ❑ **to create a coherent „corporate identity“ of the RFO and to provide horizontal support services for all levels of co-operation** (e.g. create a common Internet platform for the RFO; publication of a periodical RFO-newsletter; organisation of exchange visits between actors from border regions etc.).

The work of the „Network Helpdesk“ is of a steady and ongoing nature and consists of delivering specialised support services, which **will be implemented via a number of specific tools:**

- ❑ **Tool 1, the common WEB-Site for the RFO:** The WEB-Site should contain a “General Homepage” (providing general information on the RFO and each Thematic Forum) and “specific sections” for each Mini-Network, which allows the partners to organise their work and to co-ordinate networking activities.
- ❑ **Tool 2, general and more specific publications regarding RFO-activities:** The “Helpdesk” shall be responsible for issuing a limited number of publications, such as (1)

the proceedings of “Thematic Forum-Meetings”, (2) a limited number of specialised reports/studies supporting co-operation at the level of RFO-priorities (e.g. thematic studies, best-practice manuals on project-level cross-border co-operation etc.) and (3) a regular “Network-Newsletter” dealing with activities carried out at the level of the individual “Mini-Networks.

- **Tool 3, exchanges between / study visits for actors from different border areas covered by the RFO:** This is an important tool that helps to transfer and upgrade practical know-how with regard to coherent project elaboration methods as well as sound and efficient management techniques. A limited number of events should be organised within the RFO, both for “main partners” (i.e. staff responsible for project implementation in a region or a cross-border structure) and for selected “associated partners” (i.e. project promoters).

- **Tool 4, “technical assistance” for the elaboration of Mini-Networks and “training seminars” on project elaboration/management methods:**
 - **Technical assistance during the elaboration phase of individual Mini-Network proposals:** This aspect is an essential factor of crucial importance, as it helps to increase the success rate of Mini-Network applications. The „Network Helpdesk“ should therefore provide specialised support services such as “Goal Orientated Project Planning-Workshops” or advice in establishing adequate management instruments and financial management tools.
 - **Training seminars on project elaboration/management methods:** These events are dedicated to already established Mini-Networks and shall help to raise awareness on crucial issues that condition success of truly cross-border co-operation projects (e.g. principles of partnership-based elaboration of projects; practical methods for joint project elaboration such as “Goal Orientated Project Planning”; the inter-cultural dimension of project-co-operation; ways of setting up and maintaining a solid project-partnership; legal and financial issues of project co-operation; information on specific technical requirements of external funding programmes).

Overview on the expected overall outputs Resulting from the RFO-co-operation activities		
Level of Co-operation	Type of activity	Results /Outputs (quantified where possible)
Co-operation at the level of each RFO- priority	Activities of each “Thematic Forum”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Regular Meetings of each “Thematic Forum” (2 meeting / year), including one “Annual Conference”. ❑ Identify and promote best practice standards on theme specific cross-border co-operation across Europe.
	Helpdesk Support Activities for co-operation at priority level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Organisation of regular Thematic Forum Meetings and Annual Conference. ❑ Publication of proceedings of the regular “Thematic Forum”-meetings. ❑ Publication of 1 specialised report/study for each RFO-priority (4 thematic studies on cross-border co-operation) ❑ Publication of 1 best-practice manual on project-level co-operation.
Co-operation at the level of specific RFO sub-projects (Mini- Networks)	Activities of the “Mini- Networks”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Creation of at least 2 and a maximum of 4 Mini-Networks per Priority (8-16 Mini-Networks in total) ❑ Regular Meetings of each Mini-Network (4 meetings / year) ❑ 5 elaborated project proposals per Mini-Network (40-80 project proposals in total), which can be submitted to other EU funding schemes such as INTERREG IIIA, PHARE CBC or TACIS CBC. ❑ Input of Mini-Networks to priority-level co-operation (“Thematic Forum”).
	Helpdesk Support Activities for co-operation at the level of “Mini- Networks”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Technical assistance events during the elaboration phase of individual Mini-Network proposals (8-16 events in total). ❑ Training seminars on project elaboration/management methods: One training seminar” for each Mini-Network (8-16 events in total). ❑ Publication of a regular “Network-Newsletter” dealing with activities carried out at the level of “Mini-Networks”.
General Support for Networking	Other General Support Activities of the Helpdesk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Organisation of exchanges between / study visits between actors from different border areas. ❑ Establishing and running the common RFO-WEB-Site. ❑ Ensuring a coherent link with Strand A-activities of the forthcoming INTERACT-programme.

Mini networks (RFO-projects)

Co-operation and management structures

Common criteria for project structure and project selection

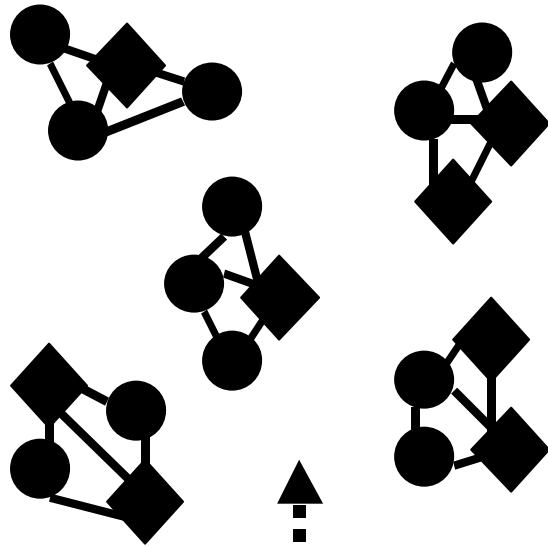
RFO-STRATEGY: Priorities and indicative budget (ERDF+national contribution)	
Priority 1: Enhancing Endogenous Economic Development in Cross Border Areas	2 Million Euros
Priority 2: Promoting Balanced and Co-ordinated Development Planning in Cross Border Areas as well as Co-operation among border regions with similar geographical features	2 Million Euros
Priority 3: Enhancing lasting cross-border structures and facilitating mutual knowledge and mobility in Cross Border Regions	2 Million Euros
Priority 4: Promoting Sustainable Development in Cross Border Regions	2 Million Euros
Priority 5: RFO-Management, support to overall networking and technical assistance to individual co-operation projects.	2 Million Euros

Thematic Forum 1

Thematic Forum 2

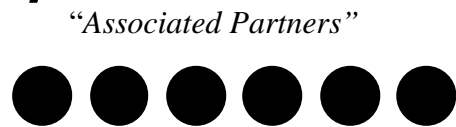
Thematic Forum 3

Thematic Forum 3



establish Mini-Networks...

and participate in ...



“Associated Partners”



Other “Main Partners”



Lead Partner



RFO Steering Group

participate in

Support to Mini-Networks and their activities

RFO-Helpdesk (AEBR)

Support to general RFO networking